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ABSTRACT

For many years, the traumatic things that happened to people were overlooked as a possible cause of frightening, distressing, and sometimes disabling emotional symptoms such as depression, anxiety, phobias, delusions, flashbacks, and being out of touch with reality. In recent years, many researchers and health care providers have become convinced of the connection between trauma and these symptoms. They are developing new treatment programs and revising old ones to better meet the needs of people who have had traumatic experiences. This booklet can help you to know if traumatic experiences in your life may be causing some or all of the difficult symptoms you are experiencing. It may give you some guidance in working to relieve these symptoms and share with you some simple and safe things you can do to help yourself heal from the effects of trauma. This booklet contains information, ideas, and strategies that people from all over the country have found to be helpful in relieving and preventing troubling feelings and symptoms. The information in this booklet can be used safely along with other health care treatment. (GCP)

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Recovering Your Mental Health

ED 470 357

Dealing With The Effects Of Trauma

A Self-help Guide

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A Self-help Guide

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
Center for Mental Health Services

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Originating Office

Center for Mental Health Services
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
5600 Fishers Lane, Room 15-99
Rockville, MD 20857
SMA-3717

Foreword

This booklet is one of six mental health self-help booklets:

- Making and Keeping Friends
- Building Self Esteem
- Action Planning for Prevention and Recovery
- Dealing with the Effects of Trauma
- Speaking Out for Yourself, and
- Developing a Recovery and Wellness Lifestyle.

It contains information, ideas, and strategies that people from all over the country have found to be helpful in relieving and preventing troubling feelings and symptoms. The information in this booklet can be used safely along with your other health care treatment.

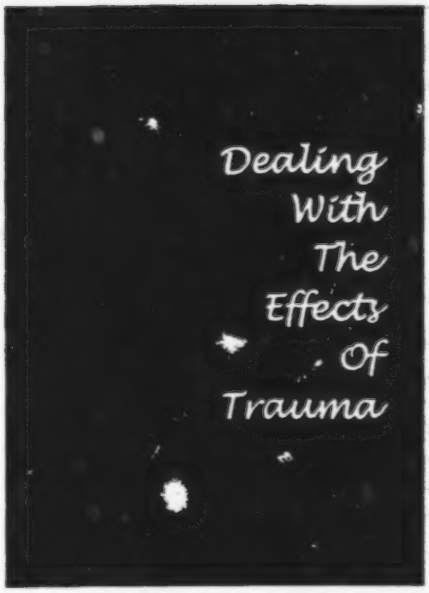
You may want to read through this booklet at least once before you begin working on developing your own action plans. This can help enhance your understanding of the entire process. Then you can go back to work on each section. You may want to do this slowly, working on a portion of it and then putting it aside and coming back to it at another time.

After you have finished developing your plan, you may want to review and revise it on a regular basis as you learn new things about yourself and ways you can help yourself to feel better.

Charles G. Curie, M.A., A.C.S.W.
Administrator
Substance Abuse and Mental Health
Services Administration

Bernard S. Arons, M.D.
Director
Center for Mental Health Services

Introduction



This is a serious issue. This booklet is just an introduction—a starting point that may give you the courage to take action. It is not meant to be a treatment program. The ideas and strategies are not intended to replace treatment you are currently receiving.

You may have had one or many very upsetting, frightening, or traumatic things happen to you in your life, or that threatened or hurt something you love—even your community. When these kinds of things happen, you may not "get over" them quickly. In fact, you may feel the effects of these traumas for many years, even for the rest of your life. Sometimes you don't even notice effects right after the trauma happens. Years later you may begin having thoughts, nightmares, and other disturbing symptoms. You may develop these symptoms and not even remember the traumatic thing or things that once happened to you.

For many years, the traumatic things that happened to people were overlooked as a possible cause of frightening, distressing, and sometimes disabling emotional symptoms such as depression, anxiety, phobias, delusions, flashbacks, and being out of touch

with reality. In recent years, many researchers and health care providers have become convinced of the connection between trauma and these symptoms. They are developing new treatment programs and revising old ones to better meet the needs of people who have had traumatic experiences.

This booklet can help you to know if traumatic experiences in your life may be causing some or all of the difficult symptoms you are experiencing. It may give you some guidance in working to relieve these symptoms and share with you some simple and safe things you can do to help yourself heal from the effects of trauma.

Some examples of traumatic experiences that may be causing your symptoms include—

- physical, emotional, or sexual abuse
- neglect
- war experiences
- outbursts of temper and rage
- alcoholism (your own or in your family)
- physical illnesses, surgeries, and disabilities
- sickness in your family
- loss of close family members and friends
- natural disasters

- accidents

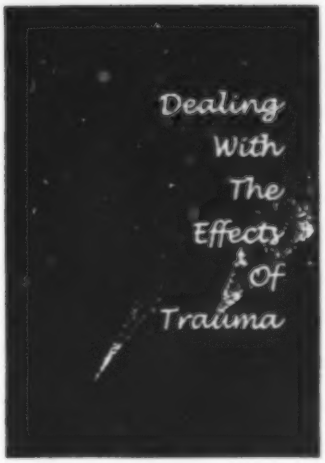
Some things that may be very traumatic to one person hardly seem to bother another person. If something bothers you a lot and it doesn't bother someone else, it doesn't mean there is something wrong with you. People respond to experiences differently.

Do you feel that traumatic things that happened to you may be causing some or all of your distressing and disabling emotional symptoms? Examples of symptoms that may be caused by trauma include—

- anxiety
- insomnia
- agitation
- irritability or rage
- flashbacks or intrusive memories
- feeling disconnected from the world
- unrest in certain situations
- being "shut down"
- being very passive
- feeling depressed
- eating problems
- needing to do certain things over and over
- unusual fears
- impatience
- always having to have things a certain way
- doing strange or risky things
- having a hard time concentrating

- wanting to hurt yourself
- being unable to trust anyone
- feeling unlikable
- feeling unsafe
- using harmful substances
- keeping to yourself
- overworking

Perhaps you have been told that you have a psychiatric or mental illness like depression, bipolar disorder or manic depression, schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, obsessive—compulsive disorder, dissociative disorder, an eating disorder, or an anxiety disorder. The ways you can help yourself handle these symptoms and the things your health care providers suggest as treatment may be helpful whether your symptoms are caused by trauma or by a psychiatric illness.



Help From Health Care Providers, Counselors, and Groups

You may decide to reach out to health care providers for assistance in relieving the effects of trauma. This is a good idea. The effects of trauma, even trauma that happened many years ago, can affect your health. You may have an illness that needs treatment. In addition, your health care provider may suggest that you take medications or certain food supplements to relieve your symptoms. Many people find that getting this kind of health care support gives them the relief and energy they need to work on other aspects of healing. To find health care providers in your community who have expertise in addressing issues related to trauma, contact your local mental health agency, hospital, or crisis service.

If you possibly can, work with a counselor or in a special program designed for people who have been traumatized. A counselor or people leading the program may refer you to a group. These groups can be very helpful. However, keep in mind that you need to decide for yourself what

you are going to do, and how and when you are going to do it. **You must be in charge of your recovery in every way.**

Wherever you go for help, the program or treatment should include the following:

Empowerment–You must be in charge of your healing in every way to counteract the effects of the trauma where all control was taken away from you.

Validation–You need others to listen to you, to validate the importance of what happened to you, to bear witness, and to understand the role of this trauma in your life.

Connection–Trauma makes you feel very alone. As part of your healing, you need to reconnect with others. This connection may be part of your treatment.

If you feel the cause of your symptoms is related to trauma in your life, you will want to be careful about your treatment and in making decisions about other areas of your life. The following guidelines will help you decide how to help yourself feel better.

Have hope. It is important that you know that you can and will feel better. In the past you may have thought you would never feel better—that the horrible symptoms you experience would go on for the rest of your life. Many people who have experienced the same symptoms that you are experiencing are now feeling much better.

They have gone on to make their lives the way they want them to be and to do the things they want to do.

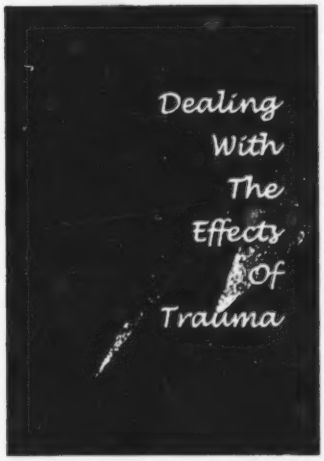
Take personal responsibility. When you have been traumatized, you lose control of your life. You may feel as though you still don't have any control over your life. You begin to take back that control by being in charge of every aspect of your life. Others, including your spouse, family members, friends, and health care professionals will try to tell you what to do. Before you do what they suggest, think about it carefully. Do you feel that it is the best thing for you to do right now? If not, do not do it. You can follow others advice, but be aware that you are choosing to do so. It is important that you make decisions about your own life. You are responsible for your own behavior. Being traumatized is not an acceptable excuse for behavior that hurts you or hurts others.

...make decisions about your own life...

Talk to one or more people about what happened to you. Telling others about the trauma is an important part of healing the effects of trauma. Make sure the person or people you decide to tell are safe people, people who would not hurt you, and who understand that what happened to you is serious. They should know, or you could tell them, that describing what happened to you over and over is an important part of the healing process. Don't tell a person who responds with statements that invalidate your experience, like "That wasn't so bad." "You should just forget about it," "Forgive and forget," or "You think that's bad, let me tell you what happened to me." They don't understand. In connecting with others,

avoid spending all your time talking about your traumatic experiences. Spend time listening to others and sharing positive life experiences, like going to movies or watching a ball game together. You will know when you have described your trauma enough, because you won't feel like doing it anymore.

Develop a close relationship with another person. You may not feel close to or trust anyone. This may be a result of your traumatic experiences. Part of healing means trusting people again. Think about the person in your life that you like best. Invite them to do something fun with you. If that feels good, make a plan to do something else together at another time—maybe the following week. Keep doing this until you feel close to this person. Then, without giving up on that person, start developing a close relationship with another person. Keep doing this until you have close relationships with at least five people. Support groups and peer support centers are good places to meet people.



Things You Can Do Every Day to Help Yourself Feel Better

There are many things that happen every day that can cause you to feel ill, uncomfortable, upset, anxious, or irritated. You will want to do things to help yourself feel better as quickly as possible, without doing anything that has negative consequences, for example, drinking, committing crimes, hurting yourself, risking your life, or eating lots of junk food.

- **Read through the following list.** Check off the ideas that appeal to you and give each of them a try when you need to help yourself feel better. Make a list of the ones you find to be most useful, along with those you have successfully used in the past, and hang the list in a prominent place—like on your refrigerator door-as a reminder at times when you need to comfort yourself. Use these techniques whenever you are having a hard time or as a special treat to yourself.

- **Do something fun or creative,** something you really enjoy, like crafts, needlework, painting, drawing, woodworking, making a sculpture, reading fiction, comics, mystery novels, or inspirational writings, doing crossword or

jigsaw puzzles, playing a game, taking some photographs, going fishing, going to a movie or other community event, or gardening.

- **Get some exercise.** Exercise is a great way to help yourself feel better while improving your overall stamina and health. The right exercise can even be fun.

- **Write something.** Writing can help you feel better. You can keep lists, record dreams, respond to questions, and explore your feelings. All ways are correct. Don't worry about how well you write. It's not important. It is only for you. Writing about the trauma or traumatic events also helps a lot. It allows you to safely process the emotions you are experiencing. It tells your mind that you are taking care of the situation and helps to relieve the difficult symptoms you may be experiencing. Keep your writings in a safe place where others cannot read them. Share them only with people you feel comfortable with. You may even want to write a letter to the person or people who have treated you badly, telling them how it affected you, and not send the letter.

- **Use your spiritual resources.** Spiritual resources and making use of these resources varies from person to person. For some people it means praying, going to church, or reaching out to a member of the clergy. For others it is meditating or reading affirmations and other kinds of inspirational materials. It may include rituals and ceremonies—whatever feels right to you. Spiritual work does not necessarily

occur within the bounds of an organized religion. Remember, you can be spiritual without being religious.

- **Do something routine.** When you don't feel well, it helps to do something "normal"—the kind of thing you do every day or often, things that are part of your routine like taking a shower, washing your hair, making yourself a sandwich, calling a friend or family member, making your bed, walking the dog, or getting gas in the car.

...do a reality check...

- **Wear something that makes you feel good.** Everybody has certain clothes or jewelry that they enjoy wearing. These are the things to wear when you need to comfort yourself.

- **Get some little things done.** It always helps you feel better if you accomplish something, even if it is a very small thing. Think of some easy things to do that don't take much time. Then do them. Here are some ideas: clean out one drawer, put five pictures in a photo album, dust a book case, read a page in a favorite book, do a load of laundry, cook yourself something healthful, send someone a card.

- **Learn something new.** Think about a topic that you are interested in but have never explored. Find some information on it in the library. Check it out on the Internet. Go to a class. Look at something in a new way. Read a favorite saying, poem, or piece of scripture, and see if you can find new meaning in it.

- **Do a reality check.** Checking in on what is really going on rather than responding to your initial "gut reaction" can be very helpful. For instance, if you come in the house and loud music is playing, it may trigger the thinking that someone is playing the music just to annoy you. The initial reaction is to get really angry with them. That would make both of you feel awful. A reality check gives the person playing the loud music a chance to look at what is really going on. Perhaps the person playing the music thought you wouldn't be in until later and took advantage of the opportunity to play loud music. If you would call upstairs and ask him to turn down the music so you could rest, he probably would say, "Sure!" It helps if you can stop yourself from jumping to conclusions before you check the facts.

- **Be present in the moment.** This is often referred to as mindfulness. Many of us spend so much time focusing on the future or thinking about the past that we miss out on fully experiencing what is going on in the present. Making a conscious effort to focus your attention on what you are doing right now and what is happening around you can help you feel better. Look around at nature. Feel the weather. Look at the sky when it is filled with stars.

- **Stare at something pretty or something that has special meaning for you.** Stop what you are doing and take a long, close look at a flower, a leaf, a plant, the sky, a work of art, a souvenir

from an adventure, a picture of a loved one, or a picture of yourself. Notice how much better you feel after doing this.

- **Play with children in your family or with a pet.** Romping in the grass with a dog, petting a kitten, reading a story to a child, rocking a baby, and similar activities have a calming effect which translates into feeling better.

- **Do a relaxation exercise.** There are many good books available that describe relaxation exercises. Try them to discover which ones you prefer. Practice them daily. Use them whenever you need to help yourself feel better. Relaxation tapes which feature relaxing music or nature sounds are available. Just listening for 10 minutes can help you feel better.

- **Take a warm bath.** This may sound simplistic, but it helps. If you are lucky enough to have access to a Jacuzzi or hot tub, it's even better. Warm water is relaxing and healing.

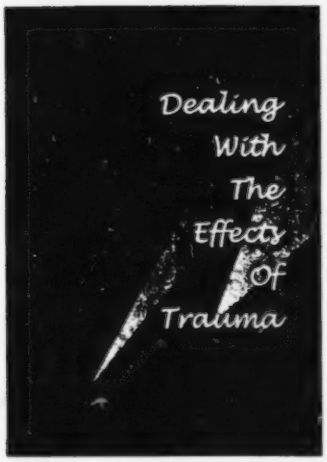
- **Expose yourself to something that smells good to you.** Many people have discovered fragrances that help them feel good. Sometimes a bouquet of fragrant flowers or the smell of fresh baked bread will help you feel better.

- **Listen to music.** Pay attention to your sense of hearing by pampering yourself with delightful music you really enjoy. Libraries often have records and tapes available for loan. If you enjoy music, make it an essential part of every day.

- **Make music.** Making music is also a good way to help yourself feel better. Drums and other kinds of musical instruments are popular ways of relieving tension and increasing well-being. Perhaps you have an instrument that you enjoy playing, like a harmonica, kazoo, penny whistle, or guitar.

- **Sing. Singing helps.** It fills your lungs with fresh air and makes you feel better. Sing to yourself. Sing at the top of your lungs. Sing when you are driving your car. Sing when you are in the shower. Sing for the fun of it. Sing along with favorite records, tapes, compact discs, or the radio. Sing the favorite songs you remember from your childhood.

Perhaps you can think of some other things you could do that would help you feel better.



The Healing Journey

Begin your healing journey by thinking about how it is you would like to feel. Write it down or tell someone else. In order to promote your own healing, you may want to work on one or several of the following issues that you know would help you to feel better.

- Learn to know and appreciate your body. Your body is a miracle. Focus on different parts of your body and how they feel. Think about what that part of your body does for you. Go to your library and review books that teach you about your body and how it works.

- Set boundaries and limits that feel right to you. In all relationships you have the right to define your own limits and boundaries so that you feel comfortable and safe. Say "no" to anything you don't want. For instance, if someone calls you five times a day, you have the right to ask them to call you less often, or even not to call you at all. If someone comes to your home when you don't want them to be there, you have the right to ask them to leave. Think about what your boundaries are. They may differ from person to person. You may enjoy it a lot when your sister comes to visit, but you may not want a visit from your brother

or a cousin. You may not want anyone to call you on the phone after 10 p.m. Expect and insist that others respect your boundaries.

- Learn to be a good advocate for yourself. Ask for what you want and deserve. Work toward getting what you want and need for yourself. If you want to get more education for yourself so you can do work that you enjoy, find out about available programs, and do what it is you need to do to meet your goal. If you want your physician to help you find the cause of physical problems, insist that he or she do so, or refer you to someone else. When you are making important decisions about your life, like getting or staying married, going back to school, or parenting a child, be sure the decision you make is really in your best interest.

- Build your self-esteem. You are a very special and wonderful person. You deserve all the best things that life has to offer. Remind yourself of this over and over again. Go to the library and review books on building your self-esteem. Do some of the suggested activities.

- Develop a list of activities that help you feel better (refer to the list in the section "Things you can do to help yourself feel better"). Do some of these activities every day. Spend more time doing these activities when you are feeling badly.

- Every family develops certain patterns or ways of thinking about and doing things. Those things you learn in your family as a child will

...you can become your own loving parent...

often influence you as an adult—sometimes making your life more difficult and getting in the way of meeting your personal goals. Think about the ways of thinking and doing things that guide you in your life. Ask yourself if they are patterns, and if you need to change them to make your life the way you want it to be. For example, in your family you may have been taught that you never tell anyone certain family secrets. In fact, it may be very important to share some family secrets with trusted friends or health care providers. Or you may have been taught that you must always do what certain members of your family want you to do. As an adult, it is important that you figure out for yourself what it is you want to do. In effect you can become your own loving parent.

- Work to establish harmony with your family or the people you live with. Plan fun and interesting activities with them. Listen to them without being critical.

- Work on learning to communicate with others so that they can easily understand what you mean. When talking with another person about your feelings, use "I" statements, like "I feel sad" or "I feel upset" rather than accusing the other person. You may want to practice good communication with a friend. Ask your friend to give you feedback on how you can be more easily understood.

- You may have lots of negative thoughts about yourself and your life. Work on changing these negative thoughts to positive ones. The more

you think positive thoughts the better you will feel. For instance, you may always think, "Nobody likes me." When you think that thought, replace it with a thought like, "I have many friends." If you often think that you will never feel better, replace that thought with the thought, "Every day I am feeling better and better."

- Develop an action plan for prevention and recovery. This is a simple plan that helps you stay well and respond to upsetting symptoms and events in ways that will keep you feeling well.

Using the activities in the section "Things you can do to help yourself feel better," make lists of things that will help you keep yourself well and will help you to feel better when you are not feeling well. Include lists:

- to remind yourself of things you need to do every day - like getting a half hour of exercise and eating three healthy meals - and also those things that you may not need to do every day, but if you miss them they will cause stress in your life, for example, buying food, paying bills, or cleaning your home;

- of events or situations that may make you feel worse if they come up, like a fight with a family member, health care provider, or social worker, getting a big bill, or loss of something important to you. Then list things to do (relax, talk to a friend, play your guitar) if these things happen so you won't start feeling badly;

- of early warning signs that indicate you are starting to feel worse - like always feeling tired, sleeping too much, overeating, dropping things, and losing things. Then list things to do (get more rest, take some time off, arrange an appointment with your counselor, cut back on caffeine) to help yourself feel better;

- of signs that things are getting much worse, like you are feeling very depressed, you can't get out of bed in the morning, or you feel negative about everything. Then list things to do that will help you feel better quickly (get someone to stay with you, spend extra time doing things you enjoy, contact your doctor); and

- of information that can be used by others if you become unable to take care of yourself or keep yourself safe, such as signs that indicate you need their help, who you want to help you (give copies of this list to each of these people), the names of your doctor, counselor and pharmacist, all prescriptions and over-the-counter medications, things that others can do that would help you feel better or keep you safe, and things you do not want others to do or that might make you feel worse.

...list things to do that will help you feel better quickly...

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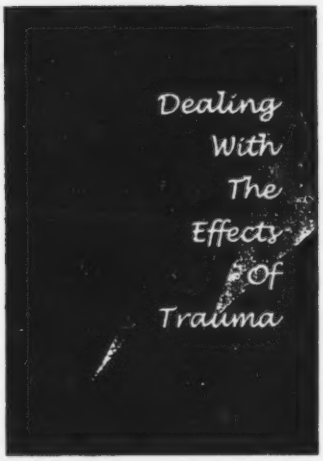

Barriers to Healing

Are there any things you are doing that are getting in the way of your healing, such as alcohol or drug abuse, being in abusive or unsupportive relationships, self-destructive behaviors such as blaming and shaming yourself, and not taking good care of yourself? Think about the possible negative consequences of these behaviors. For instance, if you get drunk, you might lose control of yourself and the situation and be taken advantage of. If you overeat, the negative consequences might be weight gain, poor body image, and poor health. You may want to work on changing these behaviors by using self-help books, working with a counselor, joining a support group, or attending a 12-step program.

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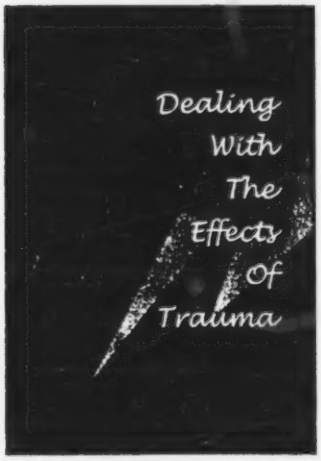


Moving Forward on Your Healing Journey

If you are now about to begin working on recovering from the effects of trauma, or if you have already begun this work and are planning to continue making some changes based on what you have learned, you will need courage and persistence along the way. You may experience setbacks. From time to time you may get so discouraged that you feel like you want to give up. This happens to everyone. Notice how far you've come. Appreciate even a little progress. Do something nice for yourself and continue your efforts. You deserve an enjoyable life.

Always keep in mind that there are many people, even famous people, who have had traumatic things happen to them. They have worked to relieve the symptoms of this trauma and have gone on to lead happy and rewarding lives. You can too.

NOTES

RESOURCES

Further Resources

It is always a good idea to learn all you can about taking good care of yourself. Your book of action plans is a great place to keep notes about things you want to try and new information you learn. You may want to contact the following organizations for more information.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
SAMHSA
Center for Mental Health Services
Web site: www.samhsa.gov

SAMHSA's National Mental Health Services Information Center
P.O. Box 42490
Washington, D.C. 20015
1 (800) 789-2647 (voice)
Web site: www.mentalhealth.org

Consumer Organization and Networking Technical Assistance Center
(CONTAC)
1036 Quarrier Street
Charleston, WVA 25301
1 (888) 825-TECH (8324)
(304) 346-9992 (fax)
Web site: www.contac.org

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)
(Special Support Center)
Colonial Place Three
2107 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201-3042
(703) 524-7600
Web site: www.nami.org

RESOURCES

National Depressive and Manic Depressive Association (National DMDA)
730 N. Franklin Street, Suite 501
Chicago, IL 60610-3526
(800) 826-3632
Web site: www.ndmda.org

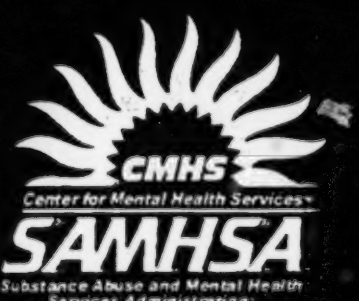
National Empowerment Center
599 Canal Street, 5 East
Lawrence, MA 01840
1-800-power2u
(800)TTY-POWER (TTY)
(978)681-6426 (fax)
Web site: www.nec.org

National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse
1211 Chestnut St., Suite 1000
Philadelphia, PA 19107
1-800-553-4539 (voice)
215-636-6310 (fax)
email: THEKEY@delphi.com
Web site: www.libertynet.org/~mha/cl_house.html

National Technical Assistance Center (NATC)
National Association of State Mental Health
Program Directors
66 Canal Center Plaza, Suite 302
Alexandria, VA 22314
703-739-9333 (voice)
703-548-9517 (fax)
Web site: www.nasmhpd.org/ntac

Resources listed in this document do not constitute an endorsement by CMHS/SAMHSA/HHS, nor are these resources exhaustive. Nothing is implied by an organization not being referenced.

You could also contract your state consumer advocacy network/agency. Find it by looking under Mental Health in the Yellow Pages of your phone book.



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